

The Praying Church

Introduction - the Power of Prayer

In our postmodern world the power of prayer has not been completely rejected. For example, actor David Hasselhoff (of *Baywatch* fame) and the 1950s Russian Communist party are both firm believers in prayer, as the following stories show:

In June 1998, the summer after the death of Princess Diana, an open-air concert was held in aid of the Princess Diana Memorial Fund at Althorp, her family home. It was a wet morning, but the rain stopped before the concert began. Later David Hasselhoff claimed that the change in the weather was a result of Diana's intervention. He prayed, "Diana, if you can do this one last thing, part the skies." "And", he claims, "she did. It was the most amazing thing she did today" (from Daily Telegraph, 29 June 1998).

"If you meet with difficulties in your work, or suddenly doubt your abilities, think of Him ... and you will find the confidence you need. If you feel tired in an hour when you should not, think of Him ... and your work will go well. If you are seeking a correct decision, think of him ... and you will find that decision" Pravda (Communist newspaper), 17th Feb 1950. These words would meet with agreement from most Christians, until you realise they were not spoken about Christ, but about Soviet dictator Stalin!

So, then, where is the power of Christian prayer? Well, Hasselhoff and Pravda had one thing right – that the effectiveness of prayer depends wholly on the power of its object. As Christians, however, we don't look to dead princesses or living dictators – we look to God Himself. This fact was central to Christ's teaching about prayer in Matthew 6:5-15. He taught His disciples not to be like to groups of people:

- a) The hypocrites – whose prayer is intended to impress man
- b) The pagans – whose prayer is intended to impress God

When we pray, we pray to our Father (the word is "Abba" – the expression of an intimate relationship) who sees what is done in secret (v6), knows what we need before we ask Him (v8), and rewards those who pray (v6). We do not need to impress God or persuade Him – His intention is to do good to us, and He has all knowledge. It is no wonder then that the model prayer begins with a desire for God's name to be respected and His will to be done (vv9&10)! Too often we tend to conceive of prayer as an effort on man's part to persuade God to do what he wants. This is not Biblical, as the following quotes show:

"True prayer is asking God for what He wants" (William Barclay)

"Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in heaven but for getting God's will done on earth" (Robert Law)

So, then, prayer does not change God or His will, but it certainly can change our hearts. Prayer does not twist the arm of God; it transforms the heart of man. Scripture also contains many examples of prayer apparently changing circumstances on earth. Although it may be accurate to say that prayer does not cause God to do anything, it is certainly true that in prayer we are brought into line with God's purposes.

The Corporate Nature of Prayer

Prayer is essentially a corporate thing – even our individual prayer! The Lord's Prayer is set in the context of Jesus' teaching about personal prayer (as v6 shows), but it is still utterly focussed on the body of Christ as a whole – "Our Father ... give us today our daily bread ... forgive us our debts". Prayer focuses first on God, and then on "us" – not on "me"!

Richard Bewes (in "talking About Prayer") quotes the "rule of thumb" of prayer, which is a simple aid to remaining balanced in our prayers:

- *Thumb* – the closest to yourself, reminding you of the people closest to you (e.g. spouse, children, siblings, parents)
- *Index finger* – the sign of authority (used to point the way or to correct), reminding you of people in authority over you (e.g. teacher, parents, church leaders)
- *Middle finger* – the longest finger, reminding you of the "big people" (e.g. those in government)

- *Ring finger* – the weakest finger, reminding you of people who are weak (e.g. the poor, ill etc.)
- *Little finger* – the smallest finger comes last, reminding you to pray for yourself

Is your prayer life healthily balanced in prayer for others as well as yourself? Are your prayers for yourself in the best interests of the body of Christ as a whole? If I pray to get a job or some other blessing, am I praying it so that the whole body of Christ can be built up and the Kingdom of God furthered? Any prayer that is not aware of the body is not a Scriptural prayer!

I know some would argue that they don't need to pray in a prayer meeting (together with other Christians) to pray for the body, and there is some truth in that, but these same people seldom argue that we can just praise alone, learn alone or serve alone. Why should prayer, the heart of the Christian relationship with God, be done exclusively alone? That would be like children in a family refusing to be together with their father even though they like to meet him individually and love to talk all about Him!

Evangelist Gipsy Smith said:

In the model church, the people will love to pray. They will love that more than anything else. They would rather go to a prayer meeting than to a place of entertainment. When the church of God uses the Apostolic standard, it will be a praying church. That will be its chief characteristic. These people prayed.

I would agree with him entirely.

In addition, I think it is important to recognise that praise is no substitute for prayer – it certainly wasn't for the early church. We can learn much from their attitude to prayer in the book of Acts. In modern times it seems that we have replaced devotion to prayer meetings with excitement about praise. The problems with this are several:

- (i) It becomes public rather than private (behind closed doors), limiting the scope of prayer as non-Christians are present
- (ii) It often removes the silence in which we listen for God
- (iii) It becomes a "led" thing – led by the "worship leader", rather than something that engages the whole body
- (iv) It becomes less focussed on the needs of others and the body as a whole, and more focussed on my own response to God's goodness
- (v) It is in greater danger of becoming a show (based on the abilities of the musicians)

I am **not** arguing that we should have no praise, and I am well aware that some (or all) of the above problems could also be true of a prayer meeting. What I **am** arguing for is a vibrant prayer meeting designed for Christians at the heart of the life of the church. If preaching, praise or programmes replace prayer as the centre-piece of the life of the church we replace our dependence on God with a dependence on gift.

Committed Endurance in Prayer

The overarching characteristic of the prayer life of the early church was endurance. The Greek word *proskartereo* is used five times in the New Testament in relation to prayer. This word comes from two words: *pros*, meaning "to", and *kartereo*, meaning "to endure". Together these words combine to become even more forceful than "endure". *Proskartereo* means to continue steadfastly with or endure in, or to continually insist upon. It is often used of devotion or commitment to a person (e.g. in Acts 10:7 – the "devout soldier who was one of his attendants" uses this word – the man was a constant attendant of Cornelius). So, it carries the meaning of commitment and endurance.

Of course, the question that often arises when discussing the church in Acts is this: "Wasn't that church different because it was filled with the Spirit in a way that our church is not?" Well, yes that may be true, but the real question is this: Was that church committed to prayer **because** it was filled with the Spirit, or was it filled with the Spirit **because** it was committed to prayer? In many ways this is the classic "chicken or egg" question, and it might be difficult to establish an answer. It is true to say that a church that is filled with the Spirit will be devoted to praying together, but it is also true that a church that wants to be filled with the Spirit (in other words that has a real hunger for more of God) will express that desire

in an eagerness for prayer. After all, collective prayer is when the church cries out to the Father for His guidance, leadership and power!

A brief glance at the 5 occurrences of *proskartereo* in relation to prayer in the New Testament will further enlighten us in this "chicken or egg" question:

a) *Before Pentecost*

Jesus had commanded the disciples, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised ... the Holy Spirit" (1:4). How did they respond? They didn't simply go back to ordinary life while they waited – they devoted themselves to prayer: "Then they returned to Jerusalem ... They all joined together constantly (*proskartereo*) in prayer ..." (1:12-14). It was into the context of a praying body of disciples that the Spirit came on Pentecost.

b) *After Pentecost*

But the devotion to prayer did not end with the coming of the Spirit, as if the presence of the Spirit in power removed the need for prayer. If anything it increased! The Acts 2 church was characterised by their devotion to four things – the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (2:42). This is the mark of truly "Spirit-filled" church – there will be an increased desire for and commitment to these four things: Biblical teaching, loving service of one another, devotion to Christ (as marked by the Lord's Supper), and dependence on God (as evidenced by prayer).

c) *Prioritised by the Apostles*

The appointment of Stephen and the other 6 helpers of the church (often called deacons, although the word isn't used in Acts 6) was to relieve the apostles from helping with the practical arrangements of the church caring for widows so that they could focus on the core of their ministry as the spiritual leaders of the church. So, what did they prioritise? Two things: "(we) will give our attention to (*proskartereo*) prayer and the ministry of the word" (6:4). This is the great task of the pastor or elder – to pray and to teach – with heart to God and hand to man! Whatever ministry we are involved in, whether teaching, Sunday School, praise, ushering etc., the greatest thing we can do is pray for those in our ministry. To be a praying pastor, Sunday School teacher, usher or PA person should be our goal. Prayer is the expression of our dependence on God – if we think we need to practice more than pray our confidence is in the flesh, not the Spirit! Prayer will refocus our priorities on glorifying God and serving others, increase our effectiveness and decrease our anxiety and pride.

d) *Commanded of us*

The expectation of a commitment to prayer did not end with Acts 2 – it is twice commanded in Paul's teaching:

"be ... *faithful (proskartereo)* in prayer" (Romans 12:12).

"Devote yourself (*proskartereo*) to prayer, being watchful and thankful" (Colossians 4:2)

In both cases the command is to the church as a whole, rather than just the individual members. If Paul could command the churches in Rome and Colossae to be devoted to prayer, then we can expect the same today. A Spirit-filled church that is not committed to enduring in prayer will not remain Spirit-filled for long, and a church that is not Spirit-filled but wants to be has no hope of this unless it is committed to prayer.

The church was devoted to (committed to enduring in) prayer before and after Pentecost. This same commitment was exemplified by the apostles and is commanded of us. How can any church neglect this vital truth?

When the New Testament Church Prayed

A reading of Acts also reveals to us the centrality of prayer in the life of the church. These early believers prayed in every imaginable situation:

1. *When facing opposition*

The Jewish religious leaders turned against Peter and John after the healing of the lame man in the Temple, and tried to ban them from speaking about Jesus. How did the church respond to this threat? "They raised their voices together in prayer to God (4:24)

2. *When seeking vision and confirmation*

In Acts 10 we read of two men who prayed. Cornelius, a Roman centurion who had been a worshipper of God, was told by an angel to send messengers to Peter in Joppa asking him to come to Caesarea. This vision was given to Cornelius when he was in prayer (v30). It was when Peter was in prayer ("Peter went up on the roof to pray" 10:9) that God gave him the great confirmation in a "trance" that the gospel was for all nations, not just the Jews, so that Peter went with Cornelius' messengers when they came to him. Similarly, after Paul's conversion when he was seeking God's guidance on how to fulfil Christ's calling on His life, Paul was in prayer. God answered by sending Ananias to him (see 9:11). If Peter, Cornelius or Paul had not been prayerful would they have been sensitive to God's leading? In prayer God's people look to Him for vision and guidance.

3. *When in crisis*

In Acts 12 Peter was arrested. James the brother of John had already been executed by Herod (v2). Peter could be next in line. The church was in crisis. What was their response? Prayer! "So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly **praying** to God for him" (12:5). Peter was miraculously led out of prison by an angel. "When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were **praying**" (12:12). The church responded to a crisis or particular need by increasing prayer, but this was not the only time they prayed – it was just an extension of their usual devotion to prayer.

4. *When making decisions*

"Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" (14:23). The choice of leaders for the early church was a particular cause for prayer. Leaders of the church need to prayer support of the members.

5. *When suffering*

"About midnight Paul and Silas were **praying** and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them" (16:25). The church at prayer is a powerful witness to the world. The fact that we depend utterly on the grace and power of God is radically different to the world, which depends on human ingenuity and ability.

6. *When saying goodbye*

"All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray" (21:5). This is an amazing picture – the whole church family kneeling on a beach to pray together! How telling about our churches that we struggle to get even a handful of the family sitting in a warm room to pray!

A Case Study – Acts 4:23-35

"... they raised their voices together in prayer to God ... After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (v31). Here we have a direct juxtaposition of the prayerful church with the Spirit-filled church. In this case at least, the filling seems to have resulted directly from the prayer. However, it is interesting to note that the believers were not praying for the filling of the Spirit (in fact there is no New Testament precedent for such a prayer). This passage is a wonderful demonstration of the presence of God among His people – not because He was with them in greater power (I doubt if this is possible given His constant presence with His people), but because they had a greater awareness of His presence with them. We need never pray for God to be with us, but we should always pray for a greater awareness of His presence.

So, what was the essence of the prayer that was answered with the filling of the Spirit?

1. *God is sovereign* (v24) – it recognises Him as the only King
2. *God speaks and works* (vv25-28) – this is a prayer of faith, recognising God's power
3. *They are God's servants* (v29) – they are submitted to His Lordship
4. *Asking for boldness to witness* (vv29&30) – their concern is with others rather than themselves
5. *In Jesus' name* (v30) – they pray based on Jesus' authority, not making demands based on their own ability or standing with God

So, it seems correct to say that prayer of faith submitting to the Lordship of Christ and desiring to be used to fulfil God's purpose will result in the person being filled by the Spirit. I am not saying that we should never pray for the Spirit to fill us, only that there is no set formula for how to ask for this, and that the filling of the Spirit is synonymous with being fully submitted to the Lordship of Christ, and to loving God with all your heart, soul and mind. These three are one, and to know one more is to know the others too.

The result of this filling was that God's purpose was achieved (v33). God's people had both great power and great grace (v33). In other words, the filling of the Spirit, which comes from faithful prayer, results in transformation of God's people and empowerment for witness. These are two of the great evidences of a Spirit-filled life – selfless loving service and bold witness (others would surely include a greater respect for Christ, a greater hunger for Scripture, and a greater awareness of and hatred of sin). If anyone claims to be filled with the Spirit but lacks either of these, it would be difficult to accept their claim. Ronald Dunn summarises the transformation among the community thus:

This is what happens to a praying church: The Holy Spirit baptises it with a new concept, a changed viewpoint.

The members have a new sense of responsibility toward one another, and they see their possessions as a trust given by God to be used as needed among the family.

Do we believe that our church could be as selfless in service and as powerful in witness as this Acts 4 church? Surely God's power has not diminished? Let us be devoted to prayer!

Prayer in Historical Revivals

If we needed any further evidence of the centrality of prayer to God's purposes in the church, we need only look to historical revivals. Let us consider one example, the most recent widespread revival in Ulster in 1859. This revival began with a Sunday School teachers' prayer meeting in 1855 to which the teachers decided to invite the entire church and the parents of their pupils. The first meeting had only one visitor, but the group carried on despite this disappointment, and over time the numbers grew. Three years later nothing had "happened", and numbers began to fall again, until on one night only two people were there. These two still decided to pray because they were committed to it. The revival finally began in December 1858, after which numbers increased dramatically.

According to Ronald Dunn (*Don't Just Stand There, Pray Something*), this origination in the faithful prayer of God's people was not unique to the 1859 revival:

For most of my ministry I have been a student of revival and awakening and I have constantly run into one stubborn fact: In the recorded history of the church, there has never been a mighty outpouring of the Spirit in revival that did not begin in the persistent, prevailing prayers of desperate people. Revival has never come because men placed it on the calendar. It has come because God placed it in their hearts.

Conclusion

Action flows from prayer. In prayer we know the heart of God, and draw on the riches of His Spirit – we are empowered and invigorated for service. This is equally true in the life of the individual and of the church. We are commanded to be committed to collective prayer. Our failure to be so is in direct disobedience to the command of scripture and reflects our lack of trust in the Lord's power to work in our lives and our church. It exposes our greater dependence on programmes, preaching, practice and praise than on the power of God Himself.

Do you desire to see our church being a vibrant, dynamic, Spirit-filled body of God's people acting in God's power according to His will? I certainly do! How could this happen? I believe the key is devotion to prayer. This may not change things overnight – it could take a period of years, like the 1859 revival, but it is the only way we can hope to see genuine revival. It could start with the Sunday School teachers, or it could start with you and me. Let us humble ourselves before God and rediscover the greatest ministry of the church – prayer.